

3-13-1982 Congregational Meeting- David Rankin Interview

[Speaker 2]

First of all, let me welcome you on behalf of the pulpit committee. We're just delighted. I see some faces that were here on Thursday night, so I guess I can't say exactly the same thing again, no matter how much I might like to.

But I also see, and I'm delighted with the number of, quote, new faces. That was entirely, of course, our idea and our hope in organizing this approach to this weekend that we could provide a couple of opportunities and invite as many of our church members as could find the time and the inclination to come and join us. I'm not gonna make any long speech.

I think everybody in this room knows what's going on generally in our church at this time. I want you just to understand that the pulpit committee feels that we want you to understand our process more. We've been trying to do that, as I think most of you know, over the last several weeks, to kind of bring you up to the speed that we feel we are at about our whole job of finding a new head minister.

David Rankin, who's here with us, of course, has the unqualified and total support of the pulpit committee. Tomorrow after church, we will meet in the sanctuary, and those church members who haven't yet voted by handing in a proxy vote will be given an opportunity, and ballots will be handed out at that time. That was a question that after the group session Thursday night, people can bring the ballots with them and hand them in on the way into church Sunday morning or wait until afterward and cast their ballots at that time.

Beyond that, hopefully if this afternoon session follows the format that we had on Thursday night, this is really an opportunity to invite you to ask David some questions about who he is and about what he's doing up here in Grand Rapids and find out some more about him. As he said, it's an opportunity for him to find out some things about you. I would like to ask people to speak up, and I may in fact ask them to stand up, or I will repeat a question so we all hear and can share in what's going on.

And with that, I'm very proud and very pleased to present to you David Rankin.

[Speaker 1]

You finished your lunch now? Let me thank you all for coming out too, and the reason I thank you is that I know it's a very important decision in the life of your church that you have to make when you look for a new senior minister, and then when you vote on a new senior minister, and it's particularly important for you at Palm Street because you haven't looked for one for 37 years, or a little more now, and therefore it's new to you, it's different to you, and in some ways it's more difficult for you. Also,

however, I want to get to know you because it's also a difficult decision for me to make, having to do with my career and the lives of my three children and my wife, Ginger.

So this gives me an opportunity to get to know you a little better. It occurred to me as I was listening to John that not only do I know the pulpit committee well, but many people from the Fountain Street Church have visited my church in Atlanta over the last year, just sort of dropping by, saying hello, coming to the service, announcing that they were from Grand Rapids. I can think of many, many people, almost every Sunday as a matter of fact, including last Sunday.

And it occurred to me when I was meeting with my board, the board of trustees last month, and they were wondering why we had had a 20% increase in church attendance. I was certainly tempted to tell them that the Grand Rapids had shifted to the south, and that was the possible reason for it. I mention that because I do know many of you who otherwise I wouldn't have known if you hadn't visited me in Atlanta.

Let's open the meeting up for your questions, and in the process, I might be throwing some questions back at you. So if anything is on your mind that you wanna ask, I guarantee you, I'm open to anything that's on your mind. You had something, a hard one to say.

No, I'm just kidding. I knew you were a kid. Yes, okay.

[Speaker 3]
Have you seen much of Grand Rapids yet?

[Speaker 1]
I've had some nice tours. I was here in September. Steve took me on a tour, which included a walking tour of the downtown.

Since we've been here, Ginger, where is Ginger? My wife is gone. She's here.

She's here.

[Speaker 13]
I saw her come in.

[Speaker 1]
I'll bet. Isn't that strange? Okay, someone has her corn out there in the hall, I'll bet.

Okay. She has been going around looking at places in the Grand Rapids area, out to Ada and the Cascade area. We're staying at Du Bois' in the East Grand Rapids area.

So yes, we've gotten around pretty well. Eaten in about three different restaurants.

[Speaker 9]
Have you seen the snow?

[Speaker 1]
Seen the snow, felt the wind and all of that, yeah. Was that a holland? No, we have not.

Flew over Holland coming in, that was all.

[Speaker 4]
Chuck Burch has questions. I thought I'd like to ask, perhaps, what about us interests you? What are you interested in about the Ponsonby Church and the Grand Rapids?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, I'll mention a number of things because there's certainly no single answer to that. One thing that interests me and I told, let me tell you of an experience I just had. I told it to the meeting the other night in that when I called the Department of the Ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Association to announce that I was going to be a candidate here, the person I talked to, who's a director of that department, said, gee whiz, that's the greatest liberal pulpit in America.

And he was very happy for me that I was being considered and thought that I would do well here and so on. So one reason that I showed an initial interest in Fountain Street was due to the great tradition, the great history that this church has. You are known and you should be known.

You have a great, great institution. Another reason is I've always been interested in urban churches. Almost all of the churches, except the one I'm in now, have been downtown, urban-type churches.

Another reason that I'm interested is I love your building. I can worship in your sanctuary better than any sanctuary I think I've ever been in. And I really enjoy your windows and your architecture.

I love your music, what Beverly does with the choir and with the organ. I have a deep affinity for that kind of atmosphere during worship. And I think, too, I had an experience in my second church as being on the radio, having a radio ministry.

So I became interested in Fountain Street when I learned that you, too, had a radio ministry. So all of those reasons go together. There's no single one answer to that.

I won't go through what I've gone through with the Polk Committee over the last year or 14 months, actually, ups and downs and questions and answers and so on, but the end result of that was that I was very much enthused about your church and thought that I would want to be the candidate for that position.

[Speaker 2]

David, in response to the question, you did do something that we probably should have done in more detail but didn't, and that was to tell the people here about the other churches in which you have served as head minister, because although they know, obviously, that you are in Atlanta at the present time, and I think many do know that you were in San Francisco, back beyond that, no, I don't think we've published too much information, and I know when we find a kindred spirit, one of our church members, great-great-grandfathers started one of your churches or something, but anyway, I was curious, and I think some of the people here would like to know a little bit about your ministerial background. Was his name Ed Pierce, was it, yeah.

Very good, he was running around with a sign that said Father Coughlin. Yeah, but he couldn't hear me.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. I was a college professor for a couple years, teaching political philosophy in the Midwest, at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. And while teaching, I became a little disenchanted with teaching and became more and more interested in religion and made the decision, Ginger and I both, and this is my wife, Ginger's now sitting over here.

We made the decision that I could go back to theological school, which would make my eighth, ninth, and 10th years of graduate education, which she supported me through all that time, and study for the ministry. And so I studied for the ministry at Tufts University and at St. Lawrence University. Following that, my first church was in Watertown, Massachusetts, and the first Unitarian Church of Watertown, Massachusetts was founded in 1629.

It's the second oldest Protestant church in North America. Has a marvelous, marvelous history and tradition. It sent the first missionary to the Indians.

It was the first church to declare congregational polity in America, to become independent of the legislature. It was a church where Thomas Hooker was born and then went and founded the Colony of Connecticut. It was the church where the Second Continental Congress met, I mean, all these things.

James Russell Lowell was a member, and Whittier was a member, and so on. I loved that place. Well, when I went there, there were only 27 adult members left, so my job was to build up the membership of this ancient parish, and I had a very good time engaged with those people there.

I then went to New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is the whaling city of America, where the Whaling Museum is. It's a city where Herman Melville wrote to Moby Dick, where the opening pages of Moby Dick begin, in the New Bedford Seaman's Bethel. Nice little chapel that was used by the Catholic priests to say the prayers for the sailors before they went out to

catch the whales, and I had the opportunity to preach at that chapel on one occasion.

And you're standing in the ship's prow, it's an actual prow, and you're standing up there and things going out like that. It's a marvelous feeling. That church had a great history, too.

It was founded in 1709, and it was founded because they wanted to combat the Quaker influence in southern Massachusetts, and so they wanted a Puritan church in that area of the country. Well, only 20 years after it was founded, it became a Unitarian church, and there wasn't much of a combat for the Quakers. Almost very similar.

The third church I served was in San Francisco, right in downtown San Francisco, near Japantown. Church that was founded in 1849 during the California gold rush by Yankee Unitarians, and it's the oldest Unitarian church west of Chicago. It has a very venerable history as well.

That was a church that was extremely active during periods of reform and race relations in San Francisco, active also in the period of the Vietnam War, and during my period, extremely active in other kinds of activities like prison reform and so on. And then I was called to the Atlanta church, which is a suburban church. It's the second largest Unitarian church in the United States, in the world, I suppose.

And its emphasis is primarily on the arts, on music, on dance, a lot of emphasis on adult education. As I say, it's a more suburban kind of experience than what I've been used to in the past. So those are the churches that I've served, and I've liked every one of them.

I've learned in every occasion something that's helped me in my ministry. And I miss a lot of people. Yes?

[Speaker 5]

What involvement do you, as a liberal minister, what involvement in the local community of other religions is important to you? In my experience, Unitarian ministries sometimes are totally separate and sometimes get involved in various ways. What's your experience, and what's your relationship with others?

[Speaker 2]

The question is, what involvement does David see in and with other religions in the community?

[Speaker 1]

In my past experience, it's depended on where I've been and what the climate of the place is. I'll give you two examples of that. In Massachusetts, in both of my churches there, I was very much active in local ministers' associations.

I was active in planning anti-war activities with other ministers, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and so on. So I was extremely active in Massachusetts, primarily because the local council of churches in Massachusetts did not have the requirement that to be a voting member, you had to proclaim a faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Therefore, I could be a member of those associations and have a vote.

Also, because the president of the Massachusetts council of churches for the whole state was often a Unitarian. So the influence of Unitarians there was very great. However, in Atlanta, there's a second example I'll give you.

I'm not hardly involved at all with other ministers of other faiths, which is primarily Southern Baptist, or with planning other activities with other churches in any kind of ecumenical way. I do work. I am on the board of Clergy and Laity Concern.

And on that board, there are some very, very liberal to progressive people from other religious faiths. But that particular board isn't accepted by the Orthodox churches in the area. So it depends on where I am and what kind of associations can be made given the climate of that particular location.

What do you think exists here, for example? I talked to Bruce about it, and he said he's not involved in those kinds of associations. But he said that Jack has some associations of that kind.

But what do you think?

[Speaker 5]

Well, I don't live in Grand Rapids, so I can't speak firsthand. But I guess I was wondering, with as strong a Calvinist climate as here, what your feeling is about coming into this kind of a situation, where it's the big emphasis.

[Speaker 1]

I'm in a minority wherever I go. I always say that. That's just a basic assumption of mine, that wherever I be, I'll be a voice of one.

So no, that doesn't concern me, that part of it, no. I would hope to make bridges if I can, if any seem to exist. But if they're not there, it doesn't bother me.

[Speaker 2]

There's a question back here.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, thanks, John.

[Speaker 3]

I've read some interesting things about you. And I guess I'd like to say that a couple of things speak to me, especially in your interest in education. I know that Mrs. Rankine is an educator, and you know that she has been. And also, because I'm a single parent with an 11-year-old daughter, I was really very interested in your ideas about self-motivating of young teenagers. I think I read something about you, and that that was an interest of yours. And that pleased me a great deal.

And I guess I'd like to say that since you've taken some tours of Grand Rapids, I'd like to volunteer some time, once you settle here, to take you on a tour of my community and the city. And you won't find many farmsteaders there. Black Hills, some people will know about that.

But there's some interesting, very nice things going on out there. And if you're ever interested in learning about one kind of a unique section of the city, I'd be happy to take you on a short tour of that. I'll take you up on that.

And then I'd like to ask you to what extent you think you might be involved in matters in education, public schooling, and so forth. Another matter here in America.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. I don't know. You know, I'd have to look over the situation and get a feel for what's happening and find out where I might fit in and so on.

But as you indicate, I'm very much interested in education. And Ginger, probably even more so, having been educated to be a teacher and having been a teacher for so long and now teaching again, she has an interest in those things. Many of my colleagues...

For example, I just heard last week that the Unitarian Minister of All Souls Church in Washington, D.C., which is right in downtown Washington, is now the chairman of the Board of Education for Washington, D.C. Very prestigious position. Plus, I think it pays \$19,000 a year over and above the salaries getting at the church. So that counts, too.

You wouldn't pay anything here. I wouldn't pay anything. But many of my colleagues see that as a very important extension of their liberal ministry, to be involved in the reform of particularly public education in the towns or cities that they live in.

And I see that as important, too.

[Speaker 2]

I have a question way back there. I have a question. I have a question.

[Speaker 9]

Quite a concern. And I first thought, you know, we don't have something. We don't believe.

We don't have... You know, what she was asking was about rights and pensions. You know, there's no real confirmation.

There's no acceptance. You don't have it. And you don't have enough to believe.

[Speaker 1]

We did that in my San Francisco church. I taught a class. I didn't dare call it a confirmation class.

But essentially that's what it was. And I worked with people, young people who were of junior high age. They were within, what, maybe two or three years of each other, that kind of age group.

We met once a week together. It wasn't any kind of lecture thing. I always had something planned I wanted to get across, but it was more discussion about matters like life and death, or what is the church, or what's the importance of religion, and those kinds of questions.

And after we were finished, I had them write a brief statement about what the church meant to them. And then on a Sunday morning, each of them presented that statement to the congregation. And it became a kind of rite or ceremony.

And the young people really seemed to like it. So I like that kind of thing myself. I really do.

I think we should always think of the dedication of children, certainly when they're youngsters, when they're infants. But we also should think of the passage of someone when they're in about the junior high school year. It's about the time that Jewish people do when they have the bar mitzvah.

It's a good time.

[Speaker 12]

You have a strong personal identification with the Unitarian Universalist group. And as you know, we have kinship with that kind of situation, but have never chosen to affiliate. I know.

What's your view on that? Do you feel any particular need to lead us in that direction? Because I don't hear that kind of conversation around here.

[Speaker 1]

I... I'm just picking up on your very last comment. A couple people have said to me they would be interested in that kind of affiliation since I've been talking to people.

But let me give you my own personal view on it. I have such a strong feeling for the whole principle of congregational politic. That's the principle that the ultimate power within the church is the congregation.

But I think on important questions of the kind you're raising, they are very clearly matters of congregational vote, congregational decision. And I would have nothing whatever to do at all in trying to influence this congregation, not even in subtle ways. I'm not very subtle anyway.

I always mess up. But not in any way would I enter into that kind of thing. People might ask me, as someone did last night, what do you think about this church affiliating?

And then I'll give them my opinion. But I would never become anyone who's agitating or trying to lead this congregation in that direction. I think your own history of independence is one that you should preserve unless it comes to that time where you feel you want to affiliate.

So I would not be involved in that kind of thing. However, I personally will be involved as a Unitarian Universalist minister in the kinds of denominational things I'm in now. I was saying the other night I'm on the urban task force for my denomination.

I teach summer theology courses for my denomination. I train student interns, 17 I've done in the last few years, training them to be ministers for my denomination. I'm on the board of the United Nations office for the UUA.

I will continue that kind of involvement personally because I have a great love and affection for my own denomination. But I can guarantee you that I would never try to influence this congregation to change its position in any kind of way.

[Speaker 2]
Bill, over here. And then Bill, over there.

[Speaker 11]
When you were here the first time, I recall, right, you described yourself as a Christian Unitarian. I wonder if you could elucidate on that a bit.

[Speaker 1]
Okay. Am I right? Yeah.

See, this is what gets me into a discussion of Unitarian Universalism when those kinds of questions come. I'm sort of apologetic about it in a way, I guess. But Unitarian Universalism began in the period of the Protestant Reformation as a Christian group.

When Unitarianism began in the 1600s in Poland and Transylvania and Switzerland, these were people who considered themselves to be Christians. Now, the Orthodox people at the time, the Orthodox Christians didn't consider them to be Christians, but nonetheless, they were. And up until about 1880, about the time this church was beginning to rethink its own theological position here at Fountain Street, all Unitarians were Christian.

Liberal Christians, to be sure, but Emerson was a Christian, Thoreau was a Christian, Longfellow, Melville, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Fuller, and so on. We're all Christians.

But when someone says they're a liberal Christian, it usually means they're coming at it from a perspective that Orthodox Christians would not enjoy or like at all. Because we believe very strongly in individual rights of religious expression. We do not believe, for example, that Jesus was born of a virgin.

We don't believe in many of the miracles that are described in scripture. Indeed, we don't believe that the scriptures are authoritative words of God, necessarily, to be taken literally. So in many, many, many ways, the liberal Christian from the time of the 16th century until today, whether you find them in a Unitarian church or whether you find them like Hans Kuhn in a Roman Catholic church, has a more progressive view on things like scripture and resurrection and crucifixion and all the other traditional aspects of Christianity.

Let me tell you this, though, because usually when someone announces they're in a particular theological category, all kinds of bells go off in people's heads. And they think of what they think a Christian is, and they say, gee, is he that? And I would say cool it on that for a while.

Because I know what happens to me if someone walks up and says I'm a Christian. All kinds of things happen to me, and I don't like what I'm thinking. What I want to tell you is that I'm now serving a church, for example, in Atlanta that probably has 85% of the membership in a humanist tradition.

And I find no difficulty whatsoever in ministering to those people, in speaking and preaching and teaching with those people. I find my own position extremely compatible with people who are humanists. We have about 40 or 50 people in our church who still nurture their Jewish backgrounds.

I have no difficulty with that at all. In fact, I'm leading the Passover Seder this year. I did a Jewish wedding two weeks ago.

So I don't take my own personal religious theology and try to stamp that on other people, and I don't expect that they are going to agree with me. What I like is dialogue, communication, and a respect for each other's position.

[Speaker 2]
Phil Stassi?

[Speaker 8]
I think you pretty well covered the first portion of my question, and it was to give kind of a thumbnail sketch of the evolution of humanitarian

thought, and what appealed to you in that evolution. The second part of my question is I wondered if you would share with us a little bit the dynamics in your family when you suggested the change to Grand Rapids from your current position, and what kind of questions do your kids have? What are your concerns about moving into a community?

[Speaker 13]
Oh.

[Speaker 1]
Let me say, I think I can sum up your first question with this kind of example that I've been thinking about. Unitarianism veered off from Orthodox Christianity around the time of William Ellery Channing, around the time of Theodore Parker, which was, the approximate years were 1830, 1850, 1860, when these kinds of thinkers, people like Channing and Emerson and Parker, began studying other kinds of scriptures. Emerson, for example, became interested in Hinduism.

What a marvelous thing. He began interpreting some of the old Hindu doctrines. Some of the new research that was going on in European universities affected Theodore Parker to make him turn from the idea that the Bible should be taken literally to the idea that the Bible, though obviously inspired, was not really the actual word of God any more than any other kind of inspired literature is.

Now what's interesting about this is that only 20 to 25 years later, your ministers here at Buckingham Street were discovering the very same thing, having gone through the Chicago School of Theology and having been trained in the new techniques of biblical research, and bringing that point of view back here to Grand Rapids and preaching it from the pulpit. The very same ideas exactly that people like Channing and Emerson and Parker had discovered over in New England. So it's an interesting thing that you're coming out of the Baptist tradition and that Unitarianism is coming out of Orthodox Christian position, and you're coming almost head-to-head and there's very little difference between the two now, except you came from different kinds of groups.

I like thinking of that kind of thing. I think it's a fascinating thing to look at. The second question you asked was about family.

I don't know if Ginger wants to respond to that. I just saw her eyes go up to the ceiling. I think you better answer it.

I'll say one thing for Ginger, that is that when Ginger first heard, she said no. She wasn't interested in moving. She hadn't come here with me.

She hadn't met anyone. So when I said, should we look into it, she said no. And so for about eight months, I said no.

And then we gradually began getting more communications with people like people on the pulpit committee, and Ginger became more

knowledgeable about it. She said, finally, well, we better really look into that. It looks like it's going to be very interesting.

The kids, Oren, my middle child, immediately said yes. He likes the snow, he said. He's a restless type, dreamy, idealistic type who could exist and probably hasn't existed on the moon or someplace else.

Just an infinitely adaptable person. My daughter is the exact opposite. She's sort of rooted in the ground like an oak tree, and she said no, I don't want to go.

Since then, she's open to the idea and now would have no difficulty with it. My oldest son is in college, and that would not represent any difficulty. He has no problems.

So I guess the thumbnail sketch answer would be that over a period of 14 months, the family has all come around to the idea that it would be a good experience.

[Speaker 2]

David, if I might, I think there's an answer that I'd like to add to Bill's question to all of you. When we, the last group of us that went down to Atlanta with the avowed purpose of seeing if we could convince the Rankins to come and stand for election, which they knew as we headed south, and they were kind enough to take us into their home for lunch, we had a lovely luncheon, and so as to not have anybody's feelings hurt or whatever. David said early on in the discussion that they had discussed this possibility and were obviously interested in what we were going to say that afternoon, but they had already decided that they didn't think they'd make any decisions.

This was on a Thursday, I believe. Until Saturday or the weekend, they had the time to talk it over after we were here and all that good business. And we said, fine, you know, you're going to make your mind up whenever you want to, or something like that, and went on to discuss the pros and cons of this whole venture.

The committee left the Rankins' house at about quarter of five that afternoon with plans to meet them for dinner about an hour, an hour and a half later, which we did. And Oren, David and Ginger's 15-year-old, came along to dinner. In between the time that we left the Rankins' home and the time that we settled in to dinner, which was probably two hours later, something had gone on in the Rankin household involving the four that were home, Mark, the oldest boy, was in school up in North Georgia.

I don't know if he was contacted or not. I'll let David fish on that one. But the long and short of it was the Rankins told us over dinner that they had had their discussion and made their decision and wanted to stand for election.

So the Rankin family can move when it wants to on an important decision.

[Speaker 7]

There was some question over here.

[Speaker 10]

Yes, I'd like to know what your definition of God is or what God is or what God isn't. Just a little question.

[Speaker 13]

Yeah.

[Speaker 10]

Also maybe touch on the concept of immortality. In the meantime.

[Speaker 13]

Not again.

[Speaker 1]

I think probably the best way to look at that from my perspective would be to look at a definition that was given, I guess, over a hundred years ago now by Schleiermacher who defined God as the feeling of absolute dependence. A definition that wasn't well accepted at the time because people wanted God to have more definition, wanted God to be more human-like, didn't want God to be dependent on human emotion, human feeling, human experience. Schleiermacher developed that definition and I think it's a very useful one because it doesn't get you into the kind of intellectualized and abstract theological discussions that you usually get into when you bring up the question of God, but it gets you back, it gets you down into your deepest feelings, into your gut, to think about what you are in the universe and how do you feel about being in the universe, what are some of those oceanic feelings you have or, as he said, your feelings of dependence and awareness that you have of being connected with that universe. What are those kinds?

What are the connections? And how do you find definition to those connections? I find them through meditation, I find them through worship, I find them through social action types of activities, I find them through counseling and pastoral kinds of activities, being with people when they're ill or being with people when they're dying, being with families where someone has died.

I find that sense of dependence and also that sense of comforting assurance that leads me to believe that there is a power, a creative power in the universe upon which I am dependent and to which I can extend some modes of communication, some modes of contact, that I am not just alone in the universe, that it's not just an abyss, that it's not just nothingness, but that I'm a part of a creative energy that gives me meaning. And that's the way I like to approach it, not from abstract theological ideas, but rather going back inside, so to speak, into that womb of me and saying, what do I really feel?

What's real for me? Now, I do that in recognition that other people don't do it that way. Other people might even go deep, deep, deep inside themselves and not have that feeling at all.

They may have another kind of feeling. They may have another kind of name for what that means to them. But for me, it's God.

That's the word I use for that. And that's why if people ask me, I call myself a theist, that I am a believer in God. But I try to base it on my own human experience, what actually has happened to me and what I feel and so on.

It's more like... I know people here are interested in Tillich, and I don't want to put Tillich down because he was brilliant. I've read just about everything he wrote, and I like him.

But he doesn't approach God in a way that's very meaningful to me. And so, I tend to use the poets more. I tend to look at Eliot or to Cummings or to Emily Dickinson.

I tend to look at people like that more to give me clues for my own experience, what I'm experiencing. I tend to like a simple man, like Loren Eisler, for that very same reason. He'll find a skull of a rat in a crevice while he's crawling up a mountain, and he'll have deep, deep feelings about what that means to him because that touches off things in his own soul.

And that's the way I like to approach things when I can. Immortality, that came up the other night as well, and I'm open on that. Laughter I went through a long period where I did not believe in any kind of immortality, in immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body or Hindu nirvana.

I thought all of that was nonsense, ridiculous. I was a complete materialist. In recent years, I have to say that in my own experience with myself and also in looking more closely into some of the literature, I've tended to be much, much more open on the subject of immortality.

Until now, I'm anxious to see what really does happen. I think it might be exciting as hell, you know.

[Speaker 2]

Laughter There's a question back here. I wonder if you would be kind enough to address the question and we'll start a little bit.

[Speaker 1]

Some of the things that were appealing to you about pop structures and also your sort of thing that you would make Laughter I answered the first part of that. I don't know if you were here then. I guess maybe the very first question or second question had to do with why I would be interested in Fountain Street.

It had to do with your history and the urban nature of your church. It had to do with the importance of preaching in your church tradition. It had to do with the radio ministry.

I did mention something I did mention the other night and that is the people I've met have been extremely and I'm not saying this to butter anybody up believe me, because I don't do that but I've met people here who are extremely sensitive to things not just intellectual things but personally sensitive. I first discovered that when I was here in September and we had a talk back after my sermon in the chapel. I was just amazed given a lot of my experience with audiences and those kinds of situations that here people were not only asking profound and important questions but they were very sensitive in the way they were asking them.

I could tell they had a feeling for me and it wasn't just one upmanship as many audiences become and it wasn't just pure antagonism as other audiences would come. It was a real sensitive feeling here and I suppose that was the first thing that struck me about your church over and above all of the other things and then in meeting the pulpit committee that was reinforced many fold that kind of sensitivity and I like that. The second part of your question though was what would turn me off?

Is that right? There are a number of things I think one is the whole problem, the whole difficulty of anyone trying to follow a 37 year successful ministry. As I said the other night, it's sort of like entering into a game of Russian roulette with yourself.

The odds against succeeding in that kind of situation are immense in terms of the history of churches who have tried to do that and so it's a tremendous gamble for me personally and for my family and so on. I would see that as the most significant problem that I would have. It requires that I be able to deal with certain things in sensitive ways but even more than that it requires a maturity among people in the congregation and part of what I do while I'm here looking at you is see if that kind of maturity is there.

Are there the kind of people here who are able to continue to love and to have affection for a man who has given them everything he has for 37 years and still accept a new minister in a way that might grow into a similar kind of relationship. Does that exist here? That's a big question.

Isn't that a challenge to you? That's a question over here that my peripheral vision wasn't working. That sounds like a lawyer's voice.

[Speaker 6]

As you look back on your career and as you look forward I assume that like us all you've gone through certain passages where emphases in your ministry have been different be it the Vietnam question or San Francisco or other kinds of things, social issues intellectual issues. Do you see yourself now coming to Foundry or in 2 to 3 to 5 years in the future having

a particular emphasis. By that I mean possibly more in the intellectual realm as opposed to a pastoral ministry.

That's a good question.

[Speaker 1]

Excellent question because it has a lot to do with my conversations with the pulpit committee over the last 14 months. My ministries have always changed according to the situation I'm in. In my first church we needed new members and I spent almost all my time beating the sidewalks trying to get new members into that church.

My second church was a social action kind of emphasis because it was a period of race riots it was a period of the Vietnam War and so on so maybe half my time was in social action and social concerns. My third ministry was in a church that had a debt of \$420,000 which was tied to the prime rate and so as that doggone rate kept going up to 13, 14, 15 percent we were just going broke. So a lot of my time there was in administration getting the staff together, working on finances and in 5 years paying off that debt so that it was erased.

In my present church there's other emphases but here I would like to spend more time than I have in any church in the area of writing in the area of not just writing sermons which is going to take a lot of time, preaching but also in the area of personal writing and publications and trying to get some books out that I've been asked to do I have three different books that I've been asked to write and I would like to spend more time in that aspect of the ministry. That would not take me out of pastoral concerns certainly wouldn't take me out of making administrative decisions and all of that but I think there would be more time given the size and the competence of the staff here for me to spend more time in writing than I'm able to do right now in Atlanta.

[Speaker 7]

I would like to ask you a question about education of the youth in the church.

[Speaker 1]

The education of the youth in the church.

[Speaker 7]

Bruce Bodie said some months ago that a survey of Unitarian Church shows that the number of youth coming back into Unitarian Church is down to less than 10 percent and whether that's the exact figure or not but when we talked about it we thought perhaps this was because there wasn't enough structure in the educational process and I've been interested in what your thought was about that.

[Speaker 1]

I would agree with that that liberal churches have the tendency of not providing enough structure for young people who are in their religious

education programs. It's the great fault of liberal education just as the opposite fault is true of your Orthodox churches where there's too much structure where they drive people away because of that. So what we have to do is to work for some kind of balance in that area.

I know I was extremely frustrated in San Francisco because I would get I would get maybe 20 calls a month from Unitarians Universalists, Quakers other liberal types from all over the country from parents who wanted their child retrieved from the Moonies or the Church of Scientology or from the Children of God and I spent an awful lot of time working my way into the inside of these cultic groups trying to retrieve children from liberal families because these children were looking for structure that they were not able to find in their own churches or even in their own homes. There's an excellent book out on that incidentally called Strange Gods which has some good chapters on how parents should relate to their children in terms of the amount of structure you should have and the amount of structure you should not have. It's an excellent discussion of the issue you raised.

[Speaker 10]

How would you change the Sunday service?

[Speaker 1]

The only thing I have to base on are the orders of service that I've read and maybe 10 or 12 that I've seen. On the basis of those 10 or 12 I've seen and on a very brief conversation with Bruce just this morning there isn't much I would change in terms of the order of the liturgy. I like the emphasis on music and less emphasis on the spoken word except for the sermon part.

I like the musical concentration. One thing I might introduce that you have not had I suppose is perhaps more movement, maybe dance, maybe me moving. I have a tendency to move.

I have a tendency sometimes if I know I'm having a sermon that's extremely informal, unstructured, I might walk around or I might sit or I might do a number of different things. I just do whatever occurs to me. But you might see more movement in that respect.

But in terms of the actual liturgy as it's done at this point I don't see anything that I would change. I might not have the spotlights as bright.

[Speaker 2]

We're going to have to put that microphone on a taller gooseneck so I can see. That's another thing I have to build up that microphone for a little bit.

[Speaker 11]

Yes. How does this congregation compare in size to the one you have up there?

[Speaker 1]

You're larger. We have membership now, it's accurate because I just heard before I left, of about 845 people. You, I understand, have a membership of about 1600 people.

We have a rule, however, in our bylaws that in order to be a legal voting member of the congregation, something that I instituted there, you have to make a financial contribution of record over the past calendar year. Now when I instituted that we wiped off.

[Speaker 2]

You should have seen Jim Jellison's face. When he heard that, he made his whole day.

[Speaker 1]

I did that in San Francisco too. It works very well because you're not telling people what to give. That's one thing.

But you are requiring that they give something. And the reason it works so well is two. The first reason being it makes it easier to clean your books because you have a mechanism by which you can do that.

In Atlanta, I got rid of 400 people who hadn't been there for years. So they were listing 1300 people when I went there. And when I cleaned the books, it went down to 700.

So that's one thing it does. It gives you a mechanism to make sure you have an accurate membership and so on. The other thing it does is something just reported by the Alban Institute last month.

This is a religious research group. It does research on religious questions. They reported on the basis of their survey number one, those churches who had such a rule and those churches who had no rule that the churches that did have the rule had an average pledge of \$100 more than those churches that did not.

It made that much difference. \$100 more per pledge. So financially you're better off as well.

So it helps your staff. It helps the finances of your church. And the third, let me emphasize the third thing that I discovered.

It makes people feel who have been giving money to the church over the years that what they're doing is really worthwhile. That there aren't other people somewhere that they're supporting. That everyone is giving something.

You share that feeling of giving together. And that's important. I've never had any trouble with anyone complaining about it either.

[Speaker 4]

It brings to my mind immediately that there are some people and there always will be people here who feel that they're giving very much but are financially unable to contribute. And they cherish their membership here. I don't feel any threat from your point of view, but I certainly wouldn't want to lose them from a misconception.

[Speaker 1]

In fact, there's two outs on that that we have. One is that people do give in-kind service of work. We have many people who work at the church.

In fact, the Atlanta church has a tremendous corps of volunteers. An amazing number of people. People who do that kind of work can use that in any kind of contributions.

And the second thing we have are people who are experiencing some financial difficulties. They just come to the minister privately or even call on the phone and there continue to be listed as legal members of the church through that kind of hardship thing. So there's those kinds of outs as well.

[Speaker 2]

If there are no other questions at the moment, Jack, we've got one back there.

[Speaker 4]

Yeah, John, if I can.

[Speaker 2]

Sure.

[Speaker 4]

Before the election tomorrow, I think the public committee needs to be thanked for having done a hell of a job. And I'd like to say for you and Ginger, before the sermon tomorrow, welcome them up.

[Speaker 2]

Thank you. What I'd like to encourage you to do, because this is the other thing that we said Thursday night and I say it again, and I think David and Ginger both will be gracious enough to agree, is let's break this up in terms of a formal sitting group, but please come up and say hello and meet these people. They want to meet you and we're going to be here for a while.

So thank you for coming and we'll see you in church tomorrow and remember to vote.